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INDIGENOUS GAMES FOR DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION

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1. Learning about cultures

One of the major messages to be transmitted through development education is that other cultures, especially those of so-called third world countries, are *equivalent* to the cultures of what are named developed countries. The basic idea is that lifestyles may be different but that they are equally important, interesting, respected, worthwhile, and are complex, too. The aim of dev/ed is furthermore to point out that human beings, including children, can adapt to many different environments and that each situation entails different problems to be met by different strategies and solutions.

These adaptations, or cultures, may be quite at variance with the ones children of the rich, industrialised societies are accustomed to. Yet they express similar human decency, attractiveness and ingenuity, and cannot be compared in terms of "better or worse". Acceptance and deep understanding of these ideas may clear the way to a more symmetrical and factual dialogue between rich and poor nations, a dialogue that is so often obscured and blocked by strong ethnocentric feelings and disparaging overtones.

The ability to see and experience the ways of living of other peoples as of equal value with one's own culture is a great mental and emotional accomplishment; even in adults these notions may often only evolve after a long lifetime of trial and error in human experiences. With children of the elementary school age, it will undoubtedly be a much more delicate process to open their hearts and minds to considerations of universal equality.

The more traditional educational approaches that aim at an increased awareness of other cultures usually consist of visual display materials that leave the overwhelmed child with sets of amazed and puzzled feelings on how he can possibly judge the images he has seen to be equally winning or pleasant as his own familiar environment. A quick analysis of the current development information shows an abundance of misery, poverty, incompetence and other frightening conditions of how people live and one can only wonder how this information cannot but *ingrain in children long-lasting convictions that they are not only better off, but indeed are better, probably in all aspects.*

Displays like this photograph may be very moving, but yet very counter-effective in young children who may readily develop through these messages disparaging feelings towards cultures from the so-called Third World.

Fortunately enough, the more derogatory presentations of children and other people from "developing" countries seem to be disappearing gradually from dev/ed materials. Instead, teaching aids are being developed that offer the young user more opportunity to identify himself with a *particular* child by providing positive, concrete and individualised information about a child from a recognisable cultural setting. UNICEF's schoolkits "Shishir of Bangladesh" and "Young in India", for example, offer good instances of this new approach.

In conjunction with the above-mentioned tangible, personalised methods, other ways are also envisageable. These have their own merits, and may in some situations be more advantageous. Children can be brought to positively accept foreign and emotionally very distant cultures by *indirect* and non-artificial methods. In the teaching aids described above, children are *directly* apprised of other cultures. Means are, however, also conceivable by which children themselves reach out and seek actively for information on other, unknown cultures and lifestyles. One of those indirect paths is to get children actively associated with indigenous games of "developing" countries.

2. Assets of indigenous games

Indigenous games are those games that likely have been played for generations in a given society and that are still enjoyed at present. A close look unveils a surprisingly vast variety of games which seem to touch upon all aspects of human life and development. There appear to be a plenitude of games that have an impact on social, verbal, mathematical, physical, imaginative or moral benaviour. Moreover, the games possess a wide span and flexibility and range from field and indoor to board, string and ball games, and from very simple activities to highly complex exercises. All these games may amuse, teach, stimulate and socialize children and grown-ups, boys and girls, alone, in pairs, or in groups. And the abundance and variety of games are bountiful: a recent study revealed the existence of more than 400 distinct games in Afghanistan alone.

Even musical instruments, music and songs, or toys, can be joined with games, as so often is the case in "developing" countries, where they exist much more frequently as one intertwined cluster of activities. Another major feature of these games is that they are *accessible to all:* they cost almost nothing -- usually a handful of pebbles or nuts or a few sticks are required -- and they can be played everywhere.

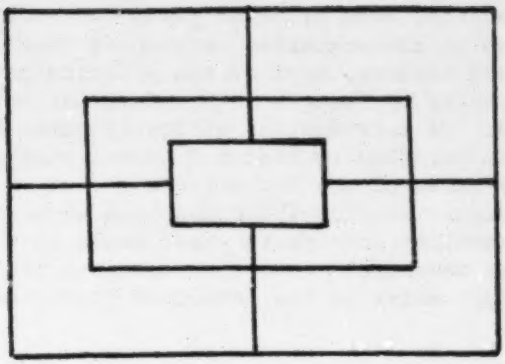

FIGURE I

Set-up of the Qatar game that is played in Pakistan.
Two players alternate putting their markers (nuts or pebbles) on one of the intersections in the diagram. The aim is to put three of one's own markers in one straight line or "qatar". Having done this, the player takes one of the markers of his opponent. One may break one of one's own qatars to form a new line of three markers. The game ends when one of the players has lost all of his markers.

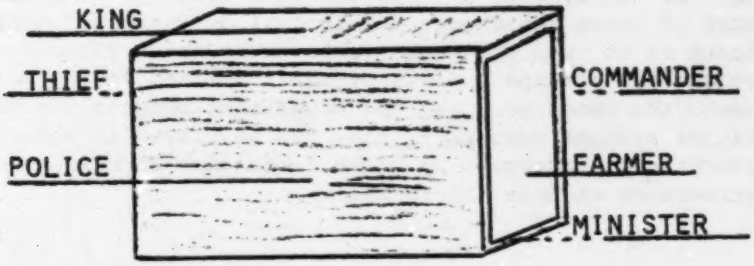

FIGURE II

Playing thief.
An Afghan game. Players choose the sides of a matchbox to designate their roles: King, Minister, Commander, Police, Farmer and Thief. Throwing of the matchbox determines each player's role. The game starts with the farmer accusing the thief of having stolen his cow. The farmer calls the police for assistance. They then climb up the line to the king by arguing with and asking for advice from the other officials. The king finally pronounces the sentence, and decides if and how much punishment the thief will receive, and this very punishment is promptly dealt out to the thief!

Remarkably enough, most of these games can still be found or are still enjoyed in the so-called developing countries. In the rich industrialised nations, most of the pristine pastimes have been lost to posterity by factors like industrialisation, television, education, or the introduction of costly games and toys. Exemplary is the famous painting by Pieter Brueghel that portrays a host of 16th century games of the Netherlands and of which only a few now can be retraced. Somehow the comparison with the present vehement search for genuine, non-hybrid wheat seeds in the isolated valleys of the "least developed" countries comes to mind. These "unspoiled" seeds no longer exist in the developed countries.

3. Indigenous games for development education

Many of these games can be made available to children in the *developed nations*, and in fact, UNICEF is working on the production of this kind of dev/ed materials. The pleasant attribute of games is of course that they are games. They are intrinsically fun and absorbing. Children *like* games, especially since there is such a wide variety in kind and complexity. Extremely relevant is also that games make children *active;* they must get *involved,* otherwise there will be no play. And the involvement is usually not restricted to only one segment of the person, like only the physical, mental or moral development, but encompasses the *whole personality*. Figures I through III show a few examples of such games that, among other faculties, trigger abstract thinking, role playing and control of aggression, and finger motor ability. And again, the *cost* of these "teaching, educational or learning" materials is *nil;* there is no need for these games to be "beautified" -- pebbles, sticks and perhaps a piece of chalk will do in any setting. Moreover, the games trespass the boundaries between the various educational systems smoothly: they can be played in school (*Formal Educational Systems*), by youth clubs *(Non-Formal)*, and in the streets or at home *(In-formal)*.

But along with these welcome educational advantages, a most important consequence for development education is that by playing the game, *the girl or boy may spontaneously develop a sense of genuine appreciation of those games and of the cultures of their origin.* The child will realise that these cultures have something relevant to offer and that children in that particular culture have their own respectable, attractive pastimes and ways of living, and are able to cope with life in a different yet recognisable and identifiable manner. Children in an American day camp who played some of these games seemed to feel that way. For them, Pakistan, New Guinea and Afghanistan have become countries where children "know" something.

Together with these feelings, it may be expected that children will develop an aroused interest in learning more about children who commonly play these games and about the countries they are from. In such a way, games form a pleasant vehicle to an increased international understanding predicated on respect for other cultures. Enjoying a game and knowing that it comes from a particular country will very likely increase the interest in knowing more about this land, or may at least function as a bridgehead on which new information can be based.

Indigenous games are of course not *the* one and only approach. Other ways that evoke the active participation of children -- like role playing, campaigns such as Halloween, discussion groups, or specific assignments -- have certainly their own virtue. And also, more informative materials will unquestionably be in great demand, especially when the child has started to develop a friendly and respectful attentiveness to other cultures. Indigenous games, however, deserve a special nook in the cupboard of dev/ed materials, if only because they form such a beautiful example in themselves of how differences between cultures can be bridged.

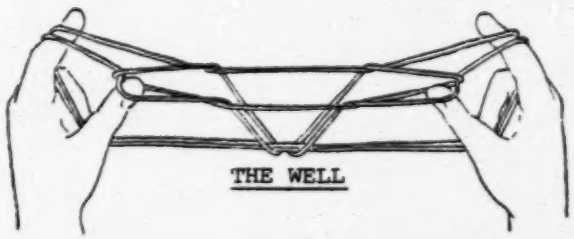

FIGURE III

Cat's cradle.
New Guinea. The adept players tell complete stories by continuously and smoothly changing the loop into new configurations and "pictures" -- heroes, giants, lions, dragons, trees, children or mountains.